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ABSTRACT

Commuter students are often left out of college programs because their needs and schedules differ substantially from the traditional student for whom the programs are planned. Once the basic educational needs of the commuter student are being met, planners can focus on developing programs geared to other needs of the commuter such as personal growth and a feeling of belonging. The first step is to conduct a demographic assessment in order to find out what the characteristics of the commuter student are. Next, a needs assessment should be performed. The needs assessment should identify current offerings and propose new ones. Using the results of these assessments, programs geared towards the specific needs of commuter students can be developed. Listed in this article are variables that can be included in assessments as well as results of assessments carried out at several colleges. (DC)

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by Penny Rue

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How to give 'em what they want

Assessment basics for commuters

By PENNY RUE

In an article in the October, 1980 edition of **The Commuter**, Bill Moore and Denny Roberts outlined the philosophical foundations of programming for the enhancement of development in college students. Most campuses, in fact, offer a wide range of programs where students can learn new skills, take on leadership roles, and relate in more meaningful ways to others.

Unfortunately, however, commuter students may be inadvertently left out of traditional activities because the realities of their lives and schedules and their developmental needs may differ widely from the mythical "typical" student for whom activities are planned. Commuters may also be excluded from formal and informal communication and contact systems.

Most offices involved in meeting the needs of commuter students develop in a way which mirrors Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The top priorities must be addressing the commuting students' basic needs: food, shelter, and safety. This translates, for our purposes, into helping commuters make adequate living arrangements and find transportation or a place to park.

Once these basic needs are being met by such services as off-campus housing offices, shuttle buses, carpooling, and-or priority parking, we can begin to address higher needs on the Maslow hierarchy. The needs for a feeling of belonging and greater personal growth can be enhanced by staff members through programming for commuters.

The first difficulty encountered when trying to plan programs for commuter students is lack of information about the population. On many campuses, the only true generalizations which can be made about commuters is that they don't live on campus and they are a heterogeneous population. It is intuitively obvious that the program needs of a freshman living at home with parents will differ in many respects from needs of upperclassmen living independent of their families. And both of these groups differ significantly in their needs from returning adult students with families and jobs. Unless one knows the characteristics of a commuter population, therefore, it is difficult to begin the task of program planning.

An important type of assessment of commuter students for the purposes of program planning is demographic assessment. This will result in a profile of exactly what subgroups constitute a commuter population. The actual items to be included in this type of a study will vary from school to school but should be designed to yield information which will make a difference in the kind of programs offered or in the way these programs are offered. Numerous reports of demographic assessments have been published in previous issues of **The Commuter**.

Earleen DeForest and Bill Moore, in an ACPA Commission XVII Workshop earlier this year, suggested the following list of characteristics to include in a student profile:

— type of living arrangement
— distance from campus
— usual means of transportation to campus
— academic classification (including full- or part-time)
— sex
— age
— employment status
— ethnic origin
— marital status
— major
— reasons for commuting

An analysis of this data would allow one to make more accurate generalizations about the population and plan programs more likely to be of interest to them.

Demographic information alone will not provide specific information about the needs of your commuter population, however. To obtain this kind of data it is necessary to perform a needs assessment. In a needs assessment, needs or educational deficits are prioritized because while needs are infinite, human resources (dollars, time, people) are finite. An educational system must rank its goals in order to meet critical needs first. (English & Kaufman, 1975.) The goals of a needs assessment are relatively simple: "A needs assessment gathers information about where a learner or learning group would like to be or should be, where they are currently, and the discrepancy between where they want to or should be in terms of acceptable objectives" (Monette, 1977, p. 84).

Moore and DeForest suggest typical variables which might be included in a needs assessment:

— reasons to stay on campus (for activities)
— publicity resources used
— ratings of various problem-concern areas
— use of-sufficient information on Campus Services
— satisfaction with campus-services-facilities
— involvement in activities
— interest in specific commuter programs-services
— location for studying
— additional comments-concerns-suggestions

The Clearinghouse has on file the results of several needs assessments which were performed at various schools. An examination of highlights of some assessments performed in 1980 gives a good idea of the types of information solicited in surveys and the potential usefulness of the results:

1. Kutztown State College (PA) Office of Non-Residence Life found virtually all of the most pressing needs of commuter students to be related to getting information: academic, career, social, and activities related.

2. Eastern Washington University in Spokane found that only a third of their commuter students considered themselves informed about activities, and half of their commuter students returned to campus for activities less than once a month. In line with this, the largest percentage preferred activities which take place between noon and 4 p.m.

3. Commuter students at the University of New Hampshire were found to have needs which were concrete in nature, e.g., help with tenant and consumer issues, information about community social and cultural events, and transportation.

4. The three main problem areas for commuters at University of Maryland-

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The basics of assessment

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Baltimore County in 1980 were found to be: exploring career choices and decisions, selecting appropriate courses, and looking for a job, probably not significantly different from those of resident students.

5. At Oregon State University a survey of problems associated with commuting found some understandable responses: time when classes and events are offered, parking, lack of space, and amount of time spent in commuting.

Although simple enough in concept, a needs assessment must be planned carefully if the results are to be useful. Most experts suggest that assessment strategies should start with a planning team rather than an individual. A group has the advantage of a combination of perspectives and should be composed with this diversity in mind. If the group is formed with an eye toward those individuals on campus who will be critical for implementation of any programs as well, key support can be built in from the beginning. A typical assessment group for program planning might include staff members from activities offices, the counseling center, career planning and placement, recreation, academic support services, admissions, or any others on your campus who are actively involved in meeting students' needs.

Another critical early step in needs assessment is to ascertain what kinds of programs or services are already being offered. Current services are informative of what we assume students' needs to be and reflect considerable knowledge on the part of professionals in their areas of expertise. Collecting this data has the secondary benefits of heightening awareness among staff members of ech other's activities and identifying obvious overlaps or areas of non-service. Comparing services being offered to students' expressed needs may tell us that our programming ideas are adequate but our publicity or the time or place are inappropriate.

After identifying current offerings, a list of other potential program offerings should be brainstormed by a group of interested staff and students. Brainstorming at its best is a creative, not an evaluative, process. Ideas members have read about in their professional literature, pie-in-the-sky dreams, even expensive ideas should be tossed out. After an extensive list of actual and possible programs is generated, the list can be broken down into categories and evaluated to determine what will actually be included in the assessment procedure

If possible, a stratified random sample is optimal. If the characteristics of the commuter population are known with respect to certain critical variables, e.g., sex, age, ethnic background, full- or part-time, marital status; the survey sample should try to duplicate those percentages. If this information is not available, a random sample of the commuter population is appropriate. Randomization is critical for the generalizability of the survey.

Assessment, then, can be done at a variety of levels of sophistication, with varying price tags attached. Gaining necessary administrative support for assessment efforts can often be accomplished by highlighting the cost-effective value of having reliable data upon which to plan programs.

If efforts are to be based on more than educated guesses, accurate information is essential. Many student services professionals have a distaste for what they term "playing the numbers game," but assessment is important for more than just accountablility; it enables us to better serve our students.

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